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# WOMEN AND THE BROADCAST MEDIA

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"If you can write a nation's stories,
you needn't worry about who makes its
laws. Today television (and radio)
tells most of the stories to most of
the people most of the time."
George Gerbner, Ph.D.

The current story is a distorted one.

The broadcast media present a very narrow image of women. Thev are not portrayed in their many diverse roles in society. They are often represented as sexual stimuli, as lures, as irrelevant, as subservient, as dependent, and as the producers of services of which men are the beneficiaries.

Women's contributions, issues, concerns and activities receive less recognition than men's. Too often the media distort, trivialize or simply disregard them.

Women's films, which are admittedly very scarce, are rarely broadcast on any of the Canadian stations and networks. They are turned down on the grounds that they are biased and do not conform to policies of fairness and balance.

The distortions, the lack of attention paid to women's issues, and the limited access which women have to the broadcast media have a direct impact on women's equality. Television and radio not only entertain and inform, they subliminally condition how women perceive themselves and how they are perceived by society.

Women are also very concerned about the content of American programming. It, too, presents a distorted view of American society and American women. It also contains an enormous amount of violent programming. Women are concerned about the effect of this programming on themselves and on Canadian children and Canadian society as a whole.

Given that Canadians are bombarded with American cultural products, predominantly via the medium of television, and given that the Canadian market is a substantial one for the distributors of American cultural products, we suggest that it would be appropriate for the Canadian government to initiate

discussions with the United States with a view to ameliorating the preponderance of stereotypical and violent programming produced for the broadcast media.

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees women's equality. It also prohibits discrimination based on sex and provides for laws, programs and activities that have as their object the amelioration of conditions of disadvantaged groups including those that are disadvantaged because of sex.

Though everyone is guaranteed freedom of expression, that freedom is not absolute.

One precedent in which the court decided in favour of the limitation of freedom of expression in order to uphold the principle of equality is referred to in the Report of the Special Committee on Pornography and Prostitution:

> "note should be taken of the recent decision in the case of Regina v. Keegstra. In that case, an argument was made that the hate propaganda section of the Criminal Code was unconstitutional because of the effect it had on freedom of

expression. In the course of rejecting that argument, the court placed great emphasis on the entrenchment in the Charter of the right to equality. It was appropriate, the court said, to limit freedom of expression for the purpose of promoting the goal of equality."

This judgement was based on section 15 of the Charter which guarantees equality before and under the law and equal protection and benefit of the law to every individual. Legal opinion suggests that the "notwithstanding" clause in section 28 gives elevated status to the equality between women and men.

The Government of Canada has an obligation to honour the guarantees in the Charter. There is the obvious responsibility to prevent discrimination based on sex, and the additional responsibility to promote the attainment of the principle of equality between women and men. Section 28 came into effect in April 1985 and Employment Equity Legislation, a first step in this direction, was tabled in Parliament in June 1985.

The broadcast media, because they are regulated by government and protected by that regulation, and because they are

explicitly a public trust, have a duty to take a leadership role in promoting the concept of equality. An unfair portrayal of women, either through underrepresentation or misrepresentation, seriously undermines, and may even prevent, the attainment of equality.

This Task Force would therefore be remiss if it did not address issues of concern to women in the broadcast media.

In drafting our recommendations on these issues we have been cognizant of the Charter's requirement that limitations to rights and freedoms must be reasonable, prescribed by law, and demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society. It is also important to note that the recommendations that follow do not in any way suggest that content be regulated on a program-by-program basis.

## 1. EMPLOYMENT EQUITY

Equality of opportunity to employment, in all occupational groups and at all levels, in the broadcast industry is a fundamental step that must be taken in order to achieve the

guarantee of equality in the Charter. This will achieve two important results. Women will have more and better jobs available to them, and they will have more input into programming decisions. There is a third result, that will be discussed in more detail further on, but should be noted here: women will be less likely to be portrayed stereotypically if they are the authors of their own stories.

The Employment Equity Legislation which is now before Parliament will require the broadcast industry, amongst others, to collect data and report annually on the number of women employed in all occupational groups and at all levels, and on the number of vacancies, hirings, and promotions. This information will be made public and will be provided to the Canadian Human Rights Commission.

Employment statistics by gender are not now readily available for the broadcast industry. Statistics Canada gathers this data in wider groupings; the film industry and others are included with statistics on the broadcast industry. Private broadcasters have been reluctant to provide this information voluntarily. CBC has some data which will be referred to later in this paper.

Employment statistics will be available if the Employment Equity Legislation is passed, but even if it is not the CRTC can require all broadcast licensees (and should not limit this requirement to licensees with 100 or more employees as the Employment Equity Legislation does) to submit this data on an annual basis. We recommend that they do so and that:

- the CRTC require each licensee as a condition of licence to implement an employment equity program which will have the effect of having women represented in all occupational groups and at all levels within their company or corporation in proportion to their representation in the labour force, by at least 1996.

- the employment equity programs must include the recruitment, promotion and training of women in order to realize this objective.

## 2. SEX-ROLE STEREOTYPING

Sex-role stereotyping occurs on at least three levels in the broadcast media: the portrayal of women compared to men; sexism;

and sexually abusive and degrading images described, most accurately, as pornography.

Some work has already been done in these areas. In 1979, the then Minister of Communications directed the CRTC to "take steps to see that guidelines and standards to encourage the elimination of sex-role stereotyping from the media it regulates are formulated".

David MacDonald, who later assumed both the Communications portfolio and responsibility for the Status of Women, asked the CRTC to continue its planning to establish a task force and suggested that the task force could propose one of several mechanisms for the implementation of the guidelines it set up: industry self-regulation, CRTC regulation, or government legislation.

The Task Force, established in 1979, published its report Images of Women in 1982. It recommended that the broadcasting and advertising industries be allowed to self-regulate for a period of two years and that the CRTC undertake periodic monitoring of broadcast commercials and programming, request and assess interim reports from industry committees, assess complaints,

and, at the end of two years, publish the results of its findings in a report and create a public forum for discussion prior to the consideration of further action by the CRTC.

The CRTC's report was published in January 1986 and public hearings will take place in three cities in April 1986. Though it is not our role to second guess the results of these discussions we can comment on the information contained in the report of the CRTC.

The broadcasters, public and private, and advertisers reported on initiatives taken over the two year period.

The CBC actually began its work earlier than this. In 1979, it created a permanent Office of the Co-ordinator, Portrayal of Women, and its Board of Directors adopted a policy to reflect the role of women in Canadian society and to examine its social and political consequences.

The CBC did undertake comparative content analyses of television programs during prime time on the English and French networks. The results unfortunately show little improvement in the portrayal of women overall: while the use of women as reporters

on The National has increased from 8% in 1981 to 18% in 1984, the number of women reporters on French language information programming dropped from 20% in 1980-81 to 12% in 1984.

Though the Abella Report on Employment and Equity (1984) singled out CBC as one of four Crown Corporations to have "developed meaningful strategies and allocated resources to carry out their policies" of equal opportunity, women still occupy only about 15% of the top positions at CBC.

While the CBC deserves credit for adopting policies, for monitoring progress and for developing an affirmative action program, the results of these actions are still not visible either on the screen or in their staffing.

The Canadian Association of Broadcasters established a Sex-Role Stereotyping Committee, presented seminars, developed a complaints procedure, prepared a sex-role stereotyping information kit, and elected the first woman to their Board of Directors in October 1983. They stated that the success and viability of the self-regulatory process was clearly reflected in the industry response and that such immediate progress would not have been as evident if a strict regulatory approach had

been applied. But no analysis was undertaken prior to the development of these initiatives, or after the two year period of self-regulation, to determine whether or not progress had been made.

The advertising industry also established an Advisory Committee on Sex-role Stereotyping to sensitize and educate the advertising industry to concerns about the portrayal of women in advertising. They stated that notable progress had been made towards their goals and that attitudes within the industry had changed considerably, but recognized that the changing of attitudes is a long-term process and that sensitization and education must continue. As with the CAB, however, no analysis was undertaken by the advertisers to measure progress.

The CRTC did commission a study on sex-role stereotyping in programming and advertising on Canadian television and radio. This study focussed on the portrayal of women: how they are seen and how often they are seen, and, to a lesser extent, on sexism and sexually abusive programming. It demonstrates that, despite the initiatives taken by both the broadcasting and advertising industries, the portrayal of women remains unbalanced and distorted.

This study provides a bench mark for the portrayal of women as compared to men that can be used to measure progress over the next several years, as we recommend below.

Work has also been done on sexually abusive programming on television. As a result of public furor over the announcement by a Canadian pay-television company, in 1983, that they had signed a contract to bring Playboy programming to Canada, a sub-committee of the Standing Committee on Culture and Communications was formed to study the question of sexually abusive broadcasting. They arrived at the conclusion that this type of programming must be kept off television and radio. The CRTC has since amended its television, pay-television and radio regulations to include "sex" in the statement prohibiting any licensee from broadcasting any abusive comment or abusive pictorial representation on any race, religion or creed.

a) The portrayal of women

The study, referred to earlier, commissioned by the CRTC, shows that the frequency of appearance and the roles of women and men differ in each major area of broadcasting and advertising.

Women are generally interviewed in a non-expert capacity while men are generally interviewed in the role of expert. Women are more often associated with marriage and romantic activity and men with paid employment roles. Men are more often cast as salespersons or experts while women are more often portrayed as consumers. Women appear more often in underwear and skintight clothing than do men.

Given that this bench mark study now exists we recommend that:

- the CRTC require each licensee, as a condition of licence, to improve the portrayal of women in all major categories of programming in order that women be represented in each category in proportion to their representation in the labour force, by at least 1996.

b) Sexism

Some elements of sexism are easier to study and quantify objectively than others. Sexist language can be measured. It includes offensive and patronizing language like "the little lady" and "better half", the use of non-parallel language such

as "man and wife" rather than "husband and wife", the use of "man" or "woman" as suffixes or prefixes such as "policeman" and "man made" rather than "police officer" and "synthetic".

Sexist photography is more difficult to measure. The camera will focus on a women's cleavage or legs, for instance. One viewer will argue that the focus was too long or not necessary at all. Another will say that is was necessary in the context of the program and/or that the length of the focus was necessary to make a point.

There is also a more subtle form of sexism, more prevalent in advertising, which is very difficult to measure: for example, the use of little girls to sell women's products, the use of women to sell certain products, the come-hither look on the face of a women, etc.

We recommend that:

- the CRTC insist that all licensees, as a condition of licence, implement a policy against the use of sexist language.

Sexist photography and general sexism require a more subjective measurement. Because it is so prevalent in the broadcast media it often passes unnoticed. It is, however, a concern that must be addressed and we would therefore recommend that:

- the CRTC insist that licensees take steps to eliminate sexism from all television and radio programming and advertising. These steps would include staff training; screening and monitoring panels; and guidelines, developed jointly by the CRTC, the broadcasting industry and the public, to be adhered to as a condition of licence.

c) Sexually abusive and degrading images

This issue has already been addressed insofar as it is now listed as a prohibition in the television, pay-television and radio regulations. In order to give more force to this regulation and in order to ensure that, with changing technology, all programming delivered to Canadian homes will abide by this ruling we recommend that:

- the Broadcasting Act, rather than the regulations attached to it, include a statement prohibiting sexually abusive programming.

Recommendations to improve the portrayal of women, and to eliminate sexist language and all other forms of sexism, provide the basis for an improved representation of women in the media. It will however be necessary to monitor programming in order to ensure that progress is being made and that targets will be met. We therefore recommend that:

- The CRTC commission monitoring studies at three to five year intervals until the 1996 policy goals are achieved.

Concerned citizens always have the right to lay complaints against sexist and sexually abusive programming. The documentation of such complaints can often be expensive and time consuming. The Special Committee on Pornography and Prostitution recommended that the CRTC be given authority, and be required, to provide a means to reimburse citizens who lay a complaint against sexually abusive progamming if that complaint is upheld. We agree with this recommendation and believe it should apply equally to sexist programming. We therefore recommend that:

- all licensees be required to post a bond in an appropriate amount to ensure compliance with policies on sexist and sexually abusive programming. In the event that a complaint

is upheld by the CRTC, the Commission should have the discretion to compensate the complainant for the costs incurred in presenting the complaint, such costs to be paid by the licensee and secured by the bond.

The public is not generally aware of conditions of licence imposed by the CRTC. Few complaints do not indicate a lack of concern, as many broadcasters have implied. The broadcast media are in the best position of all to advise their public on regulation and initiatives relating to sex-role stereotyping. We therefore recommend that;

- licensees be required to broadcast announcements that will inform the public of regulations and initiatives that relate to sex-role stereotyping and to advise that comments should be addressed to the CRTC.

## 3. PROGRAMMING BY, FOR AND ABOUT WOMEN

"Changes in the portrayal of women will occur only partially through the removal of existing sexist content. Positive change requires the extensive development of new content which is

designed to portray women in the full range of their roles and experience, from their own perspective." (Images of Women, page 27)

Programming by, for and about women is rarely seen or heard on the broadcast media. Even newsworthy events about women's issues and concerns rarely get the amount of coverage they deserve.

In July 1985, for instance, a major international conference marking the end of the United Nations Decade for Women was held in Nairobi. Canada played a significant role at this conference yet major Canadian networks, in the main, did not send correspondents but relied on feeds from non-Canadian sources. What little coverage there was reduced political differences to "women's squabbles" and ignored the discussion and resolution of the serious and substantive issues at hand.

The National Action Committee on the Status of Women sponsored a debate with the three major party leaders before the 1984 federal election. Immediately following the telecast a male commentator denounced it as "boring".

Broadcasters may argue that any form of regulation to remedy the bias against women in the media is an infringement of their freedom of expression. Women's inability to gain access to the broadcast media is a denial of women's freedom of expression. The lack of programming by, for and about women is, in fact, a form of censorship.

Bias in news coverage will hopefully be remedied by the employment equity and stereotyping recommendations made earlier.

What also is necessary is the production of dramatic and other programming made by women. In order to accomplish this women must be given equal access to the funding available for programming. We would therefore recommend that:

- the funds administered by Telefilm Canada, for the production of television programming, be directed to the production of programming by women proportionate to women's representation in the labour force, by at least 1996. A women's production can be determined as such in much the same way that a program is now determined to be Canadian.

We further recommend that:

- licensees be required to provide air dates for women's productions in ratio to the number of women's productions funded by Telefilm Canada.

The results of employment equity regulation, and the apportioning of Telefilm Canada funds to women's productions will be very gradual. There is still a need to redress the historic imbalance and to record the history of women from their own perspective. Though films of this type could be commercially viable that should not necessarily be their goal.

Studio D, the women's studio at the National Film Board, is the only studio of its kind in Canada. By at least one measurement, the Academy Awards, Studio D is producing good films. The NFB, established in 1939, has received eight Academy Awards and three of them have been awarded to Studio D which only began operations in 1975.

Studio D also uses its production dollars very effectively. For the price of one Meatballs, ($1.8 million) a mass entertainment film funded by the Canadian Film Development Corporation (now Telefilm Canada),

Studio D produced the following eight films: Not A Love Story, If You Love This Planet, The Way It Is, Dream Of A Free Country, I Want To Be An Engineer, It's Just Better, Julie O'Brien, and Portrait Of The Artist As An Old Lady. Since 1982, Not A Love Story and If You Love This Planet have been the two most frequently requested documentaries in the NFB's library.

Studio D operates out of the English production branch of the NFB. The decision to make a film must be approved by persons outside the Studio although the greatest understanding of subject and audience rests within. Also Studio D has never been able to maximize distribution of its films since the system of distribution is developed for the entire English production branch and is based on general audience research that frequently overlooks women's point of view. Studio D has taken the initiative of using the national women's network to augment the standard distribution system but has had neither adequate resources nor the official mandate to do so.

Studio D's films are rarely seen on the broadcast media despite Canadian content quotas and Studio D's low licence fees. They are perceived as being biased. Women would argue that

mainstream productions often show a bias that is not recognized as such because it conforms to the prevailing norm and is so pervasive that it is invisible and is declared not to exist. Recent examples would suggest they have a point. Abortion: Stories From North and South, was denied telecast because it did not meet the standards of the CBC's journalistic policies on fairness and balance. Yet, Final Offer, highlighting only the union's point of view in contract negotiations, and an episode of The Nature of Things, highlighting the Haida Indian's position on logging on the Queen Charlotte Islands, were televised.

In light of the significant contribution being made by Studio D, it is appropriate that it's role be enhanced and that it be given the responsibility for building a bank of films which addresses women's concerns. They should be encouraged, however, to continue to make use of independent women film makers in order to fulfil their dual role of producer and trainer.

We therefore recommend that:

- 10 per cent of NFB funding ($63 million) be dedicated to Studio D, and that 50% of Studio D's production budget be allocated to independent productions.

- Studio D operate as a separate and autonomous branch of the NFB reporting to the Board of Governors.

- Studio D's mandate include the production and distribution of films in both official languages.

- Studio D productions be given adequate distribution on the CBC and on any second Canadian service.

## 4. INTERNATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Canadian women have a unique opportunity open to them that should be explored. The equivalent of Studio D does not exist anywhere else in the world. We have recommended that its budget be substantially increased and that Telefilm funds be more fairly apportioned for women's productions. Many women in other countries would like the opportunity to see what Canadian women are producing. CBC is investigating the possibility of putting Canadian programming on a satellite pointed at the American market. We therefore recommend that:

- any initiatives taken by CBC, or other government departments or agencies, to beam Canadian programmming into

the U.S., or any other country, include the provision of adequate and appropriate broadcast time for the distribution of films by, for and about women.

At the Nairobi conference women discussed the possibility of using satellite delivery to share information in order to contribute to world development. Because Canada has the technological capability it can play a leading role in this initiative. We therefore recommend that:

- the Department of Communications and External Affairs Canada undertake a feasibility study to determine the role Canada can play in developing an international women's network via satellite to promote world development.

## 5. REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN ON GOVERNMENT APPOINTED BOARDS

Political will is always needed to implement and enforce recommendations, guidelines, even laws. Women are convinced that they will not achieve equality until they are fairly represented on decision making boards and commissions. They are

also convinced, because past experience has demonstrated this to be so, that they must also be represented on boards and commissions by women and men who are committed to the concept of equality for women.

We therefore recommend that:

- **Women be represented on government appointed boards and commissions that govern and regulate the broadcast industry in proportion to their representation in society.**

We further recommend that:

- **all government appointed boards and commissions that govern and regulate the broadcast industry, including but not limited to the CRTC, the CBC, the NFB, and Telefilm Canada, be made up of a fair number of women and men who have demonstrated a special interest in the equality of women.**

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BROADCASTING ACT

In order that the recommendations on Women and the Broadcast Media satisfy the Charter requirement that limitations to rights and freedoms be prescribed by law the following statements, or statements having the equivalent meaning, must be included in the Broadcasting Act.

As is stated in Bill C-20, section 3 of the Act should be amended by adding the following paragraph:

- "(c.1) the programming provided by the Canadian broadcasting system should respect and promote the equality and dignity of all individuals, groups or classes of individuals regardless of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex (preferably "gender"), age or mental or physical disability".

Section 16, regarding powers of the Commission, should be amended by adding the following two paragraphs:

- (b. ix) requiring licensees to submit to the Commission such information regarding employment equity programs and sex-role stereotyping data in order that progress in

attaining the goal of equality between women and men may be assessed.

- (b. x) requiring licensees to post bonds to be used to compensate complainants for the costs incurred in presenting a complaint about sex-role stereotyping.

- (b. xi) would state what now is stated in section (b. ix).

The Act should have the following statement contained in the body of the Act rather than in the attached regulations for television, pay television, and radio:

- "A licensee shall not distribute in its programming any abusive comment or abusive pictorial representation that, when taken in context, tends or is likely to expose an individual or a group or class of individuals to hatred or contempt on the basis of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex (preferably "gender"), age or mental or physical disability."

In order to effectively monitor the progress of licensees regarding employment equity and sex-role stereotyping, and to allow for public discussion on their progress, broadcast licences should continue to be given for terms not exceeding five years.